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**AT SEA**

BY RABBI JULIUS LEIBERT  
Pensacola, Fla.

(Continued from last issue)

"And would you call the kid an atheist?" I dissented.

"I would," the captain declared in a tone of finality. "Anyone who comports himself as if God weren't around, or didn't care what he said, or did—well, for all practical purposes that person is an atheist."

The captain's definition touched off an explosion in my mind. I had always held that professing, even when attended by backsliding, was religiously speaking, preferable to outright negation. But now, after listening to him, I was no longer sure of my ground.

A knock at the door helped relegate my dilemma to the future. Bidding the caller enter, I rose and unlatched the door. Presently, a youthful second lieutenant stood before me. He was trembling all over and gobs of perspiration glistened uncertainly on his high forehead.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"I'd like to see a chaplain—a Catholic chaplain," he announced, his breath coming in gasps.

I explained to him that, through some unfortunate circumstance, no Catholic chaplain had been assigned to our transport.

A look of dismay came over the lieutenant, "That is too terrible, too terrible," he moaned.

"Maybe I can help you," I offered.

He studied my insignia for a moment and with unfeigned chagrin replied: "I am afraid not. Only a priest may say Mass."

I felt so helpless. The lieutenant must have sensed it and, as if to relieve me, continued with the reasons for his request:

"You see how it is, chaplain," he sputtered. "There is a battle going on outside. I have a feeling we are going to get hit. Any moment now we may get hit. And I so wanted

to see a priest before . . . before . . ."

The lieutenant compressed his chin and began to bawl.

From here on the captain took over. He seized the lieutenant by the shoulders and straightened him out. "Stop being silly!" he commanded. "Hasn't anyone told you the secret?"

The lieutenant perked up. "What secret?" he asked excitedly.

"The bastards!" the captain swore furiously. "It's a rotten shame they have kept it from you. "Well"—and here he dropped his voice to a whisper, "ours is the first unsinkable ship that the Navy has built. Look. I am an engineer, a naval engineer, I know what I am talking about. Get me straight, this ship cannot sink. The damn Nazis can fire all their torpedoes at her and still won't send her down. Never, do you get me?"

The daze dropped away from the lieutenant. Almost gaily he questioned: "You are not kidding me, captain, are you?"

The captain assumed a hurt pose. "How dare you suggest such a thing?" he demanded sternly. "I've told you the truth. This boat is unsinkable. And that's all there's to it."

As the junior officer turned to go, the captain quickly changed from sternness to cordiality.

"Care to have a spot with me?" he wheedled.

A little later he explained to me. He was afraid the yarn might not stand up for long, so he thought he could straighten it by a show of camaraderie. Evidently, though, he must have underestimated the strength of his own taradiddle.

"Thanks, sir," the lieutenant begged off. "Haven't got a minute to spare. The boys are waiting for me. Must get the good news to them at once. Oh, God, what joy!" And he streaked out of the cabin.

The moment we were alone, the captain treated himself to another jigger and smiled complacently.

"Do you know, Padre," he said, "I rather like the kid. He's got good stuff in him, all right. You must have noticed that as well as I. Sure, he was frightened. But take it from me, fear is not the mainspring in his religious watch. I'll bet you on that. Why do you suppose he turned up his nose at my excellent bourbon? What deterred him? I'll tell you what. Love of his kind Padre, that's what deterred him. The boys were waiting . . ."

"Of course," I agreed not too patiently. "But what's so remarkable about that?"

The captain walked up close to me and for seconds fingered my tie.

"I'll tell you what's so remarkable about that," he argued. "Here we live in a world where millions are daily mouthing the stupid proverb about there being no atheist in fox-holes. If this piece of tripe has anything to tell us, it must be that fear of death is the father of all goodness . . . ! Isn't that a terrible debasing piece of philosophy? And to come across a youngster who demonstrates before your very eyes the power of love and fellow-feeling as the real levers to goodness—well, if that isn't remarkable, nothing else is."

(Continued on Page 15)

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